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## **A Primer on Grant Writing for Foundation Support for First-Time Grant Writers in Academic Libraries: Challenges and Opportunities**

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### **Abstract:**

In a majority of academic disciplines, grant writing is a skill that is often self-taught or acquired informally by trial and error. Few academic disciplines have grant writing as standard part of their curriculum at the graduate level. In the past, grant writing has received little or no emphasis in traditional library education since library science faculty themselves have a poor record of pursuing external funding. Yet, grant writing is a critical skill for new and experienced librarians. For many librarians, the prospect and challenge of writing a grant can seem daunting; however, with institutional support and the support of colleagues within the library and throughout the university, grant writing can be a meaningful endeavor as well as a learned and rewarding professional experience. As budgets for academic libraries continue to contract with the challenges of the current economy, librarians at all levels are looking to external funding to support creative endeavors within their institutions. Among the institutions on which libraries are becoming dependent for funding are foundations, which are unique American institutions of philanthropy.

## **Introduction**

Grant writing can seem like a difficult and grueling task for those attempting to obtain external funding for the first time in their professional careers, regardless of how long they have been in their respective field or their level of education (MLS, second Masters, or PhD) (Marshall, 2012). As budgets for academic libraries continue to shrink in the face of the challenges of the current economy, librarians at all levels are looking to external funding to support creative endeavors within their institutions. Among the institutions on which libraries are becoming dependent for funding are private foundations. The growth in private foundations in the United States has been exponential: in 1975, just under 22,000 foundations existed; by 2012, just over 84,000 foundations existed. Furthermore, foundation assets have grown from \$682 billion in 2008 to \$798 billion in 2012 (Foundation Center, 2013). Foundations in the United States gave approximately gave \$55 billion to various nonprofit, educational, religious, and cultural organizations in 2012 (Foundation Center, 2013).

Foundations are a distinctive part of American history and are a unique institution in American social and economic culture. Defined, a Foundation is, “That which is founded or established by endowment; an institution (e.g., a monastery, college, or hospital) established with an endowment and regulations for its maintenance.” (OED Online, np). Foundations endowed for charitable giving reflect of our nation's economic history. For example, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Gates Foundation were all funded from the profits of entrepreneurs and industrialists who wanted to give back to society and have a method of sheltering some of their assets from taxes. The principal method of distributing funds from a foundation is through

charitable gifts to recipients with a defined use for the money, and the principal way of identifying the recipients is through grants.

What is a grant? Ask this question among professional librarians and you'll get different answers: Free money? Money for a special project? Before we focus on the process of writing of a grant, we need to truly understand what a grant is and the role it plays in library funding. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a grant simply as, "A sum granted, esp. by a government or institution, to a school, institution, scholar, etc." (OED Online, np). In short, a grant could be defined as a specific amount of money, for a specific project over a fixed or finite period of time. For the purposes of this article, we will define grantsmanship as the pursuit of external funds from private foundations, or government agencies that support the mission of librarianship. The goal of this paper is to describe the basic processes and principles of pursuing external funding from private foundation to support projects at academic libraries.

## **The Need for Grants**

As a general rule, grants won't fill the holes in your budget that are created as a result of budget cuts, they won't make up for salary cuts, and they won't cover the day-to-day operating costs of your library. Instead, grants should be solicited in an effort to provide funding for a clearly defined or special project that has not been defined in the annual budget. Some examples of specific projects that grants have funded in academic libraries include endowed positions for library and visiting faculty, subject-specific collection purchase or development, rare book or retrospective cataloging initiatives, a new method of outreach to students using iPods to conduct library tours, and digitization projects for the creation of digital collections (Dodson, 1988)

(Prophet, M., Fitch, M., & He, J. , 2004) (Hill, 2010). All of these projects have either a specific purpose or a finite period of time to accomplish the tasks and they require a specific amount of funding.

### **The Ecology of the Grant**

As traditional funding resources decrease, the demand on private foundations is greater than ever before. The bottom line is that for private foundations there is a greater demand from numerous constituencies in the nonprofit and educational arena but fewer resources to go around because of the current economy. “It is also important to mention that many first grants do not get funded” (Marshall, 108) and that perseverance is often to key to obtaining external funding for your academic library.

Grants should not be written in an atmosphere of secrecy; rather, when writing a grant you should let your colleagues and your administration at the library know that you are pursuing external funding. A common theme among research directors at universities when asked what advice they would give to someone who is writing a grant is, “As soon as you have an idea for research, talk to someone about your idea...” (Brink, 1991). Furthermore, “it helps to know that you have a good idea, that the project is worth doing and whether or not it requires support from others. You may not find all of these things by yourself.” (Brink, 1991). In addition, many institutions have restricted contact lists with foundations, and it is important to have the approval of your director/dean and your development officer when pursuing external funding through a foundation. A number of institutions have established protocols when it comes to soliciting grants from private foundations, so one person to always notify in your organization is the

development officer who oversees the library. Universities have very strict rules on communication when it comes to contacting private foundations. Universities generally speak with one voice from the top of the organization, and the communication between funder and the institution is very tightly controlled. Thus, the development officer is often the key individual in getting permission to contact a foundation or donor or will contact these entities on your behalf. Always stay within the guidelines and rules when it comes to contacting donors and foundations—you may identify the funder, and you will also write the grant but, ultimately, a development officer will likely be the point of contact between your library and the foundation. When in doubt about the protocol of contacting a prospective donor or foundation, always check with a development officer; never go off on your own. Contacting a foundation without going through proper channels can damage your chances of obtaining funding even before the first draft of the grant is written.

When you make it known that you are writing a grant, you might be surprised at the level of direct and indirect support from colleagues and administrators within your library. For example, in some institutions, librarians may get time off to write a grant from home where they are free from distractions. In many instances, guidance is available from colleagues who have written successful (and sometimes not so successful) grant proposals in the past. A key part of writing a grant is time. If your university has a policy for release time for writing grants, then lobby your administration for release from your duties to devote your time and resources to the writing of the grant (Mary Washington College, 2011). Another area where your library's administration may help is funding for a research assistant to help collect data for your grant or providing assistance with data analysis (a statistician or a graduate student in statistics) (Brink, 1991).

## **Getting Started**

Communication is the key to any successful grant. The ability to clearly state your objective and the funding requirements is key to obtaining funding from an external source. In business and marketing, the term “elevator speech” is often used to describe a content-filled message in under one minute that any layman can understand (Aileen, 2007). The same need to present a succinct summary of the need for funding is critical for a grant. For your grant, develop an elevator statement around the following questions:

- What do you want to accomplish?
- Why is your project important?
- Who will benefit?

Having quick and defined answers to these questions will be a great help when you present the idea of your grant to your library dean/director, your immediate supervisor, your colleagues, your development officer, and, most importantly, your funder.

Many grants that are awarded by the federal and state governments, which have defined application forms (e.g., grants awarded by state libraries under the Library Service Technology Act) (Hill, 2010). Private foundations, on the other hand, often do not have designed applications, and in these cases the grant writer must submit the funding proposal from scratch. Before sitting down to write the grant, you and/or your development officer should contact the foundation to which you plan to submit your proposal to let them know to expect your application. Contacting a funding agency before submitting the grant begins the process of building a professional relationship with the program officer administering the grant, not only for

the present, but also for the future. Another key point of this conversation is learning whether your project is “a good fit” and meets the mission of the funding agency or the foundation (Blanco and Lee, 2012) (Geever & Foundation Center, 2007).

More importantly, “Talking to the program officer can provide insights on how to refine your project to better match the funding agencies (or Foundation) interests, goals and mission.”

(Blanco and Lee, 2012) A mistake often made by first-time grant writers is interpreting the support of program officers at foundations as a sure sign of their grant being awarded; this is not always the case. Lastly, during the initial conversation with the program officer, it is acceptable to ask about the review process and, more importantly, who is reviewing your grant. Knowing whether your reviewer is an individual, a group, an educated layperson, a professional librarian, or an academic from another field allows you to use the appropriate terminology and tone to be best understood. Familiarizing yourself with the review process is critical to the success of your grant (Hess and Steffes, 2011).

The first step of a grant without standardized applications is often known the executive summary or the cover letter. This first piece is generally no longer than one page and should state the following expanded version of your elevator statement in no more than four to five paragraphs.

A. What is your problem?

- a. How will you solve this problem?
- b. Why does the problem exist?
- c. Who is impacted by impacted by this problem?

B. Identify your funding requirements



C. Promote the university, your department, and your expertise.

The most common error is differentiating between identifying your funding needs and asking for funding. At this stage in the executive summary/cover letter, you are NOT asking for funds. Instead, you are simply identifying your funding needs. The ask will be done later, more than likely by your development officer (Geever & Foundation Center, 2007).

### **Project Description**

The project description of your grant should address the question (problem) and the issues that the project addresses. An effective project description should give the grant reviewer a clear picture of what the grant is to accomplish. Among the items that should be included are supporting facts and statistics that will provide evidence-based information for your project; this information may include a demographic profile of user populations, collection counts, or number of users. Use whatever statistics you believe are best to present your case, but be prepared to cite and provide additional data if asked.

Goals and objectives should also be a part of the grant. Goals provide a broad general statement of what your project will accomplish and how you will pursue the project. Following each goal, the specific objectives of that goal should be described. Objectives state what the grant recipient ultimately wants to accomplish with the grant money and provide clear measurable targets and benchmarks that can be used to evaluate the recipient's success in meeting the goal(s). The importance of goals and objectives cannot be overstated. In the event that a grant is renewable, the results from the objectives section of the original grant will be used to gauge whether a renewable grant is sustainable (Geever & Foundation Center, 2007).

Also included in the main section of the project description of the grant should also be a measurable time line for the accomplishment of a task and thus an indication of the duration of the grant. Such timelines fall under what many in business term, "project management." Although this term may intimidate those who have no background in planning, business, or administration, there is plenty of "how to" literature on this subject available. Additionally, easy-to-use software packages such as Microsoft Project can aid in the planning of a grant. It is very important to remember that individuals and families who endow private foundations generally have backgrounds in the private sector and look at grants the same way they would an investment or a business plan so in some respects it is important to present the grant as such. An evaluation component by which to gauge the success of the grant (for example, the number of patrons served or the number of items digitized) must also be included in a well-written grant. Defining these figures should be coordinated with those who are directly working on the grant as well as with colleagues whose judgment you trust. It is important to remember not to set the bar so low that the grant reviewer thinks the project is not worth the time, effort, and money, but at the same time the target should not be set so high that the reviewer looks at the time frame of the grant as being too short for the required work (Geever & Foundation Center, 2007).

## **Benefits**

The final part of the grant should consist of an unemotional statement of who ultimately benefits from the grant—whether the remote user, the scholar, or the library staff. When this part of the grant is forgotten or omitted, the grant loses its purpose and meaning. As obvious as it seems, it

is important to remember the goal of getting your grant funded isn't to add it to your vita for promotion or tenure purposes; the goal is to improve and enrich your library.

## **Budget**

As you plan your grant proposal, you will also develop a budget. A budget is drafted, just like a grant, and it may go through several revisions. Work with your library's budget officer to define the budget, taking into account salaries, benefits, institutional overhead, expenses for equipment needed (e.g., a scanner, special software), and any other costs associated with the project. Any item that your budget officer believes might result in an audit of the grant should contain a brief narrative to justify its expenditure. A clear budget narrative is often crucial to a grant proposal's success (Geever & Foundation Center, 2007) (Arlitisch, 2013). In today's economic environment, travel funds at many libraries are in short supply or non-existent. If you believe that the project being funded by a grant is innovative enough for a presentation for a conference, have your development officer inquire with the program officer at the foundation to see whether travel money for a conference presentation is fundable; often, foundations will cover this type of activity in a grant.

## **Supporting Materials**

Only include supporting materials such as photographs or letters of support if you are asked for them. If your the foundation to whom you are applying requires letters of support, make sure you obtain letters from colleagues who know your skills and your passion and commitment to the protect and your field of librarianship. If asked for financial documents, work with your

development officer and budget officer to secure these items (e.g., 990 report, which is submitted by non-profits and other tax-exempt organizations to the Internal Revenue Service).

### **The Answer Is Yes! You've Been Awarded the Grant**

If the answer is yes, work with your development officer and your library administration to immediately craft a thank you letter to the foundation that awarded the money. Follow library and university protocol as to who writes and signs the letter; it might be you, your library director, the university provost, the university president, or the chair of the board of your universities library's trustees. Work with your library administration and your institution to follow up on required reports during the grant. For example, a grant funded for 18 months may require follow-up reports every six months and a final report at the conclusion of funding. It is important to be proactive in communication with the foundation that has funded your grant; put the foundation on you library's mailing list for holiday greeting cards and newsletters. Invite foundation program officers to special events and receptions at your library if they are held. Even if they don't attend, such innovations create good will and strengthen relationships between donor and recipient (Geever & Foundation Center, 2007) (Arlitisch, 2013).

### **Sorry! Your Proposal Is Refused**

In the event your proposal is refused, do not take it as a sign of personal or professional failure. All grant writers deal with rejection at some point in their career and most face rejection at many points in their career. If possible, get feedback from reviewers or ask for copies of the reviewers' comments in an anonymous format. Do not be afraid to inquire about the prospect for future funding for the next round of grants funding. Most importantly, do not give up on your idea. If

necessary, seek another avenue of funding from a different donor or foundation, but never pass up the opportunity to improve your library. Lastly, never speak ill of a foundation that has rejected your grant application. Foundations (and other parts of the philanthropic community) are much like academia—small and professionally connected; speaking ill of a foundation that has rejected your proposal can have an unintended adverse effect on future grant proposals from you and your institution (Geever & Foundation Center, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

Many librarians look at the grantsmanship process with some trepidation, but the pursuit of external funding for new projects and initiatives will not only improve the services and collections in your library, it will also improve your professional skill set as a librarian. The ability to craft a successful grant application will improve the contributions that you make to your profession each day and will make you more marketable should you look to advance in your profession (Hess, 2011).

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